

# Grow at home, buy local: (De)commodifying 'rural' vegetables and herbs

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*Sandra Kurfürst (Cologne)*

## Abstract

In Vietnam, people are increasingly concerned about the absence of food standards and the danger this poses to their families' health. In Hanoi, urbanites are in search of clean and safe vegetables. Using results from fieldwork in Hanoi, this paper presents three strategies urbanites use to ensure food safety in the fresh produce they eat. They rely on trust-based strategies, when maintaining their daily practice of buying from local vendors or receiving their fresh food supply from relatives and friends residing in the countryside. In addition, urbanites are increasingly cultivating herbs and vegetables at home in roof top gardens or on fallow urban land. From the analysis of these strategies two main arguments are developed: First, by embedding the supply with fresh produce in social relationships and growing food at home urbanites actively shorten agricultural wholesale commodity chains. The value of vegetables and herbs in urban Vietnam is no longer solely determined by the monetary exchange value, but is assigned with a social exchange value. Accordingly, the paper argues that the commodity of fresh vegetables is being taken out of its commodity sphere, thus signifying the beginning of a process of singularization (Kopytoff, 1988). Second, by cultivating fresh produce in the city urbanites creatively employ the urban built environment and thence the materiality and materials that the city has to offer. The paper concludes that this identifies an affirmation of urban life and urbanites' "social creativity", their willingness to improve their living (Korff, 1991: 15), by dealing with the challenges and contingencies of the city.

## Introduction

Access to food, water, shelter and air are major preconditions for living in the city, like anywhere else. They constitute what Parnell and Pieterse (2010: 148) in their discussion of the 'right to the city' refer to as 'basic or 1<sup>st</sup> generation human rights'. However, particularly the first right of access to food has only recently moved into the analytical

focus of urban studies (Morgan, 2015). The 'urban food question' (Morgan, 2015) is often linked to the topics of food deserts (e.g. Weatherspoon et al., 2015; Whelan et al., 2002) and food security (e.g. Barthel et al., 2015; Crush, 2014; Morgan, 2015). The former frequently being linked to the cities of the Global North and the latter to cities of the Global South. In particular, discussions on urban gardening have largely considered access to produce in terms of economic and social justice, affordability or sustainability (Mendes, 2008; Tornaghi, 2014). So far, food safety, the concern for the products' origin, and the usage of chemicals in food processing has hardly been discussed in the context of Southern cities, where more and more consumers, in particular a rising urban middle-class, are concerned about the absence of food standards and the danger this poses to their families' health.<sup>1</sup> This paper presents urbanites responses to these perceived dangers with empirical reference to urban Vietnam. In Vietnamese cities residents, particularly members of the urban middle class, are increasingly in search of 'clean and safe vegetables' (rau sạch, rau an toàn) (Kurfürst, 2019).

Using results from fieldwork in Hanoi, this paper presents two strategies urbanites use to ensure food safety in the fresh produce they eat:

- Attaining fresh produce through trust-based relationships, such as buying from local vendors or producers
- cultivating herbs and vegetables at home in roof top gardens or on fallow urban land.

Although widely adopted, these strategies cannot guarantee urbanites' provision with safe produce.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the presented research is interested in people's social constructions of what they perceive to be clean and safe vegetables and how they ascribe new values to a well-known and usually cheap commodity. From the analysis of these strategies two main arguments are developed: First, urbanites actively shorten agricultural wholesale commodity chains in order to ensure food safety. By re-embedding the economic exchange into social relationships of trust and cultivating food at home, the value of vegetables and herbs in urban Vietnam is transformed. The value is not solely determined by the monetary exchange value, but is assigned with a social exchange value, as well. The paper concludes that the commodity of fresh vegetables is being taken out of its commodity sphere, signifying the beginning of a process of singularization (Kopytoff, 1988). The paper's arguments follow from literature on the role of trust in economic relationships (Evers, 1995; Figuié et al., 2019; Gerber et al., 2014; Horat, 2017) and on the production of value (Graeber, 2001; Kockelman, 2012; Kopytoff, 1988). Second, the paper follows Korff's (2018) definition of the city as an innovative milieu, in which solutions can be found. By planting their own vegetables and herbs at home or on fallow urban land, urbanites creatively employ the urban built environment to attain

1 For an exemption see the edited volume *Food Anxiety in Globalising Vietnam* by Ehlert and Faltmann (2019).

2 For example, the interviewed gardeners were not concerned with the origin of the soil and the seeds they used to grow their own food, nor did they worry about the degree of air pollution in the city.

food safety. Accordingly, the practice of urban gardening represents urbanites' "social creativity" (Korff 1991: 15) in dealing with the everyday challenges and contingencies of the city.

This research is drawn from fieldwork conducted between September 2014 and October 2015 in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The data were gathered using qualitative methods: interviews and site-visits at gardens. The sections on the creation of trust through face-to-face interactions, rural-urban supply and urban gardens are based on semi-structured and narrative interviews with urban consumers of fresh produce, urban gardeners and market vendors at the local Yên Phụ and the larger wholesale Long Biên market. Additionally, expert interviews were carried out with Vietnamese historians and social anthropologists.

## Agricultural commodity chains and food safety in urban Vietnam

The rising awareness for food safety in Vietnam goes hand in hand with an increasing mediatization of society. Newspapers, television and online fora increasingly report about food scandals and food poisoning, particularly with respect to the usage of agrochemicals in agricultural production. As 35-year-old Hà puts it "Everyone knows about food poisoning. Farmers use fertilizers and pesticides (...) It is everywhere, in the media, the newspaper. They run tests and explain that vegetables are contaminated."

For example, a study from 2012 conducted in eight provinces with 1050 vegetable samples showed that 51.24% contained too much pesticides according to WHO standards and 47% comprised exceeding amounts of nitrate and heavy metal substances. Another study of the Hanoi Medical University found that 72% of the 660 vegetable samples collected in Hanoi and Nam Dinh had *E. coli* bacteria (The Anh et al., 2012). In 2015, the Vietnam Food Administration reported 171 cases of food poisoning. Food poisoning and food scandals affected 5,000 people with 23 deaths (Vietnam Plus, 2016).

Figuié et al. (2019: 152) conclude:

"No sooner than the Vietnamese modern agro-industrial sector emerges, than it already shows characteristics of late modernity such as large-scale food scandals associated with new technologies (hormones, pesticides, etc.) or the influential role of media in the food system."

Accordingly, the concern about clean and safe produce has become an integral part of urban dwellers' everyday life: when friends and co-workers meet for lunch at small restaurants, when parents buy fresh products at local markets, or when families dine together, they all discuss the origin of the vegetables and the safety of the food. In other words, 'clean and safe vegetables' has evolved as an urban idiom. It is an urban idiom and at the same time the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1978). In fact, Hà's quote shows that the images of 'clean and safe' produce have lost their referents. The symbol of 'clean and safe' increasingly replaces the 'real' safe food that is ideally not contaminated with agrochemicals, such as pesticides, herbicides and fertilizer. This symbol is interpreted quite differently by the multiple actors involved in the urban food question. It is against the background of the hyperreal that the strategies presented in the following need to

be analysed. They are not to guarantee clean and safe food in instrumentally rational terms, but they do represent people's social constructions of what they imagine to be clean, safe, and fresh foods.

Vegetables and herbs are an integral ingredient of every Vietnamese meal (*món ăn*). Every dish is accompanied by cooked leafy greens and a plate of aromatic herbs and lettuce. According to Avieli (2012: 27) "greens are essential, contributing to several dimensions of the meal: nutrition (adding fiber, vitamins and minerals), texture, color, fragrance and taste". Accordingly, vegetables and herbs are sold at almost every street corner, as well as in supermarkets. Particularly seasonal greens are easy to afford, even for households with low incomes. For example, a bundle of fresh herbs in 2015 cost 4,000-6,000 VND (0.15-0.23 Euro). Consequently, it is not the access to fresh produce that poses a problem for urbanites, but the uncertainty about the products' quality and origin.

Tracing agricultural commodity chains in Northern Vietnam, Gerber et al. (2014) found that particularly the vegetable commodity chains are highly diversified. Over two-thirds of vegetables consumed in Vietnam's capital originate from Hanoi's peri-urban region, while the rest is imported from the highlands in Southern Vietnam around Đà Lạt or from China. Much of this produce is exchanged at one of the city's four major wholesale markets. From there it passes on to restaurants or neighborhood markets with the remainder being sold by mobile street vendors (Gerber et al., 2014). The complexity and diversity of such commodity chains means that the tracing back of agricultural products to their sites of origin is a difficult task for consumers. Particularly difficult is the generation of information on environmental impacts. Bolwig et al. (2010) note that environmental impacts of value chains, such as pesticides, additives and chemicals used in food processing and cleaning, may be triggered at one place, but can well reach beyond the area of origin. These environmental problems are often related to activities in a particular node of a value chain, that is the point in the value chain, where a product is exchanged or undergoes a major transformation or processing, e.g. production, transportation, or storage (Bolwig et al., 2010).<sup>3</sup> As a result, consumers find it increasingly difficult to decipher the nodes and segments of value chains, facing a great amount of uncertainty, when purchasing fresh produce.

In his theory of social reflexivity, Giddens (2001) argues that the notion of risk needs to be put alongside trust. Trust is required in order to cope with the increasing insecurities and risks in a globalized world. Trust implies having confidence in abstract systems and institutions such as in contracts or authorities for food regulation. Where such regulations or the monitoring thereof are missing, social capital has become an important resource to draw on (Horat, 2017; Koh, 2006). Gerber et al. (2014) show how social capital helps to overcome institutional gaps in agricultural wholesale commodity chains in Northern Vietnam. Due to shortcomings in the regulatory framework and monitoring of the commodity chains, the actors in these chains need to rely on relationships of trust with their business partners. Such relationships of trust evolve

3 Bolwig et al. (2010: 175) differentiate between 'nodes' and 'segments' of global value chains. A segment connects two nodes. For example, a segment exists between production and export or import and retail.

between wholesale traders and local vendors, sellers and end consumers etc. Here, the reference to social capital ensures the smooth functioning of economic transactions at each node of the agricultural commodity chain. Accordingly, social capital is maintained as a “collective property resource” (Korff and Rothfuß, 2009: 363), in an environment where abstract systems of regulation or control seem to be missing or are not trusted. For consumers the building of relationships of trust with sellers is a way to reduce the uncertainty they are confronted with in the anonymous agricultural commodity chains (Dannenberg and Kulke, 2014). Accordingly, many Hanoians maintain their daily practice of buying directly from local and street vendors in the city or in the countryside or receive boxes of fresh produce from rural residents they trust in. This (re-)embedding of economic processes in social networks is not a characteristic limited to traditional societies as suggested by Polanyi (1977), but occurs each time markets expand (Evers, 1995).

Such re-embedding of food supply in social relationships also transforms the value of the usually cheap and easy affordable commodity. In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* Graeber (2001: 1-2) differentiates between three definitions of value: First, value is what makes a meaningful difference. Second, value can be measured by the willingness to give something up for something else. Third, value is what is desirable and good. In the light of food safety, the symbol of ‘clean and safe’ is exactly what makes a difference, when buying or receiving vegetables and sets them apart from the usual fresh produce sold at the market. Furthermore, the index ‘clean and safe’ is exactly what makes the vegetables desirable and good. The second definition of value is based on the logic of equivalence. The idea that “equivalence of value should turn on geometric ratios” (Kockelman, 2012: 12) is based in Aristotelian thinking. Drawing upon Aristotle’s conceptualization of value, Marx (1867) defines value as a relation between people mediated by a relation between things (Kockelman, 2012). Kopytoff (1988) adds to this that the social relations of the production of a commodity determine its value. The empirical cases presented in the following illustrate that value is determined not only by the social relations of production but by the social relations of exchange, too.

The following section discusses the state’s attempt to attain control and to assign responsibilities for food safety in the segments of agricultural commodity chains. The empirical data hints to citizens’ distrust in the control and monitoring system stipulated by the state. This discussion is followed by one on the rise of supermarkets, which are promoted by the state as warrantors of food safety. Again, this state initiative does not receive much acceptance by urban consumers. The main part of the paper, divided into two empirical sections, then investigates urbanites’ strategies to ensure food safety.

## The state’s attempts at food safety

During the last decade, the Vietnamese government has undertaken diverse efforts to establish a control system along the segments of value chains. Already in 1995 the government introduced the “safe vegetables” program. The program comprised training as well as technical support for farmers to improve the management of irrigation water, fertilization, as well as the application of pesticides (Mergenthaler et al., 2009).

The current legislation consists of two laws, one more generally targeting the quality of products and goods and the other directly addressing food safety. According to the 2008 Law on the Quality of Products and Goods, manufacturers and traders are held responsible for the quality of their products, while the overall control of the quality of goods, including food products, is assigned to the Ministry of Science and Technology. The 2011 Law on Food Safety establishes the rights and obligations of organisations and individuals with respect to food safety, the business conditions to ensure food safety and the advertising and labeling of food products, etc. The overall responsibility for the testing and enforcement of food safety is assigned to the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ministry of Industry and Trade (Van Nguyen, 2014).

Even before the passing of these laws, two important decisions were made in 2007, the year cholera reappeared in Hanoi. The government and the municipality both identified the lack of hygiene and awareness of the careful preparation of food as the main cause of the outbreak. Therefore, immediately after the outbreak, the municipality of Hanoi started public awareness-raising campaigns. In the same year, the Prime Minister signed Decision 149/2007/QĐ-TTg. Among other measures the program sought to ensure food hygiene and safety in producing, preserving, and processing agricultural products. Furthermore, the program particularly aimed at ensuring street-food hygiene and safety. With respect to agricultural production, Decision 102/2007/QĐ-BNN of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development further defines the legal utilization of fertilizers. The decision supplements 155 fertilizers that can be produced, sold and used in Vietnam (Bo Nong Nghiep va Phat Trien Nong Thon, 2016). Although this legal framework exists, most citizens complain that producers' and suppliers' adherence to the regulation is not properly monitored.

For modern retail outlets, the government has additionally introduced a certificate for vegetables. The certificate testifies that vegetables are produced in line with the national regulations on the production of safe vegetables (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2014). Overall, the presented policies aim at the promotion of supermarkets, and the reduction of local markets and street trade.

The first big supermarkets were built in Hanoi around the turn of the millennium in the two central districts of Hoàn Kiếm and Hai Bà Trưng. One was established in the upper floor of what was then the first shopping mall of Hanoi, Tràng Tiền Plaza, another in the basement of the Hanoi Towers at Hai Bà Trưng St, which is where multinational companies and international donors are located. By 2005/6, larger supermarkets had already emerged at the Southern urban fringe such as Big C in the district of Thành Xuân and later Metro in Hoàng Mai District. These supermarkets had a two-fold appeal for consumers. First, their modern outer appearance and sanitized interior appeared to promise hygienic and healthy products. Second, the storage racks offered global products that until then had hardly been available in Vietnam. Going shopping in the supermarket became a sign of distinction and of status. The ascribed value of distinction was equaled by a monetary value that made these goods only affordable to particular social groups with high enough incomes.

Yet, the purchase of goods in supermarkets cannot be simply reduced to forms of "conspicuous consumption" in Veblen's (1899) terms. On the contrary, supermarkets of-

fer a wide array of everyday products that urban dwellers need for their daily food supply. In particular, in the New Urban Areas (NUA) of Hanoi, supermarkets are often the sole provider of fresh products. For example, in 2005, the inhabitants of the then quite recently built NUA of Ciputra and Trung Hòa Nhân Chính found themselves in a dilemma: On the one hand, they could not afford to buy in the supermarkets because the goods there were too expensive. On the other hand, purchasing fresh products from local markets or street vendors in the area was not an immediate option since they were just not available in the neighborhood. The NUA had been built on agricultural land lacking a generic infrastructure such as local markets (Labbé and Boudreau, 2011). Supermarkets were the only places to turn to. Interviewees explained that they would still purchase vegetables, fruits, meat and fish from the local markets in their old neighborhoods, which they had left for a higher quality of life in the condominiums or villas of the NUA.

The promotion of supermarkets also affected the system of established urban markets. The 'Decision of the Prime Minister Approving the Program on the Development of Marketplaces until 2010' promulgates the upgrading of marketplaces in urban areas and the construction of supermarkets (Gerber et al., 2014). Big markets that had been the economic center of the city for centuries were torn down, making space for new large-scale developments such as supermarkets and shopping malls (Endres, 2014; Gertman, 2011). Most of the old markets occupied urban land of high economic value. An example is Chợ Cửa Nam, the origin of which dates back to Hanoi's role as royal city. The royal citadel was surrounded by a rectangular wall with four gates in the direction of the cardinal points. In front of the gates, permanent and periodical markets were held (Logan, 2000). Cửa Nam, translating into Southern Gate, was one of these gates, where markets were periodically held. In 2010, right in time for Hanoi's 1000th anniversary, a new commercial center opened on this site. In the basement of the 13-stories-high-rise building a supermarket offers vegetables, meat, fish and beverages, while the remaining floors are used as office space and car park. However, many of the upgraded markets remain empty and are generally not accepted by urban consumers.

Catering to the demand for safe and clean fresh produce, a new shop model has evolved in Hanoi. So-called safe foods shops (cửa hàng thực phẩm an toàn) are mushrooming all over the city. These privately owned shops actually fill the gap between the anonymous purchase in supermarkets and the personal interaction with traders at the local markets. The shops all carry a big green logo saying 'safe foods'. The label frequently comes with a photo displaying a beautiful basket of fresh vegetables and fruits and sometimes meat. Although the logo and photo suggest some form of standardization and certification, most shop owners seem to interpret the label of safe foods quite differently. For example, the safe foods shop at Yên Phụ St. in Tây Hồ District only offers imported goods. These goods comprise fresh produce from New Zealand, Italian Barilla noodles and German Haribo. Vegetables, fruits and meat are packed in plastic and kept in the refrigerator. The vegetables carry a label indicating that they are imported from New Zealand, yet without any specifications and labels from New Zealand. By contrast, the safe foods' shop in the NUA Linh Đàm, located approx. 8 km south of the city center, is run by an elderly woman. Her portfolio is not as diverse as the one at Yên Phụ. She does not sell any imported fresh products at all. Asked about where her vegetables come



from, she answered that she receives them from suppliers in her home province Nam Định, one hundred kilometer south of Hanoi. Likewise, there is no label indicating the safety of food, except for her verbal insurance.

Consequently, the labeling of food – be it verbally or indexically – has become an important marketing point. The idiom and hyperreality of clean and safe vegetables has opened up a space for negotiation and for marketing, as diverse providers seek to cater to the demand for safe fresh produce. The idiom is even appropriated by street vendors in Hanoi. At 5 pm, the peak of the rush hour, a street vendor offers her commodities in a small basket on the road side in Hanoi's Ancient Quarter with a green sign indicating 'safe vegetables for sale'. The adoption of the label by street vendors is particularly interesting since authorities have blamed street trade for the lack of hygiene and for creating health hazards. Indeed, since the 1990ies, the municipal authorities have conducted several attempts to eradicate street trade from the urban landscape (Koh, 2006). When cholera broke out again in Hanoi in the winter of 2007, street vendors, who were deemed unscrupulous and profit-oriented and thought to be unhygienic in their food preparation practices, were publicly blamed as purveyors of the disease (Lincoln, 2014). Shortly thereafter in 2008, the municipality of Hanoi ordered a ban on street trade in 64 streets of the city center (Kurfürst, 2012; Turner and Schoenberger, 2012). However, so far this policy has not yielded the desired results. Instead of finding themselves in decline, streets markets have mushroomed in Hanoi. Rather than turning to the promoted supermarkets, urban dwellers seem to stick to their daily routine of buying from street markets (Gerber et al., 2014; Wertheim-Heck et al., 2014). In fact, the census by Wertheim-Heck et al. (2014) shows that 95% of the total vegetable consumed in the city of Hanoi are exchanged at local markets or through street trade, and only 2.3% of the vegetables are traded in supermarkets and convenience stores. 40-year-old Nam says: "Even in the supermarket you cannot be sure that the products are clean and safe." According to him, the state label is not a warrantor of food safety since the regulation lacks a proper control and monitoring system.

This asynchronous development of the promotion of supermarkets as warrantor of safe foods and the persistence of local markets argues for a lack of trust in the national certification system and private wholesale regulations on food safety. In other words, the attempts at standardisation have yet to result in the construction of trust among consumers. Meanwhile in an effort to respond to this uncertainty, urbanites have developed different strategies that are built around personal relationships based on trust.

## **Buying local: creating trust through face-to-face interactions**

At local markets and between mobile street traders and the consumers, the economic exchange is embedded in a social relationship of trust. The sensory experience of being able to touch, smell or even taste the fresh produce increases trust between the seller and buyer (Figuíé et al., 2019; Mele et al., 2015).

Through the daily face-to-face interactions at the market, sellers and buyers create "bridging social capital" – social relationships with people different from oneself but acting in the same social field (Putnam, 2000: 20). Consumers will usually buy particular



goods from different stalls, depending on recommendation from others and their own experience of the quality of goods offered at the market stalls. If the quality of the produce is low, consumers will know whom to blame.

Truth be told, people buy little from supermarkets, this has yet to be developed. By contrast, the market is close to the home, it is more convenient. People will buy from stalls where they know the vegetables are safe (Anh, 28 years old, translated from Vietnamese).

Buying local, can also mean buying directly from the producers in rural areas. Again “farmer shopping” is a form of consumption solely based on trust as consumer actually do not have any information on the actual farming practices (Wertheim-Heck and Spaargaren, 2016: 659). Important is the reference to the countryside that is considered a purveyor of safe and fresh produce (Kurfürst, 2019: 223). The idea that ‘rural’ produce is clean and safe, moreover, appears to be a driving force, when urbanites attain their supplies with agricultural products from kin or friends residing in the countryside (Kurfürst, 2019; Wertheim-Heck and Spaargaren, 2016). Such an appraisal of trust-based relationships and the countryside hint towards the different evaluative techniques urbanites apply to assess food safety. They maneuver between utility-based and value-based evaluative techniques, the former referring to instrumental rationality, and the latter to value rationality (Weber, 1978). The instrumental values underlying preferences for one agricultural product over another might be tied to price, certification, or the products’ origin (such as being imported from New Zealand or Germany). In contrast, value rationality implies that “the relative desirability of two options makes sense because of some aesthetic, ethical, or religious ideal. Such ideals make unconditional demands on us, and we value them for their own sake, independently of our prospects for success” (Kockelman, 2012: 193). The evaluation of those agricultural products that are delivered directly from the countryside as clean and safe appears to be value-based. It is informed by the prevalent imagery of the countryside in Vietnam as being less polluted than the city (Gillen, 2016; Fuhrmann, 2017). Of course, the adoption of different evaluative techniques can result in a discrepancy between what is rationally defined as safe foods (degree of contamination with agrochemicals or bacteria) and what is perceived to be clean and safe (rural origin, trusted seller). Likewise, Ehlert and Voßsmer (2015) note that customers tend to draw on different kinds of knowledge, such as rational information on food quality or emic constructions of what is believed to be fresh food. These different evaluative techniques are also at stake in the context of urban gardening. Although cultivating vegetables and herbs in a highly polluted environment in the city of Hanoi, still the home-grown produce is valued for its safety.

## Grow at home: roof top gardens and urban green

Apart from attaining fresh produce from trusted persons, vendors or kin in the countryside, the cultivation of vegetables and herbs at home has become a common strategy among the city dwellers, particularly the urban middle-class, to attain clean and safe produce. Urbanites grow food on rooftops, balconies, in recycled fruit boxes and milk packages as well as on fallow urban land. The so-called tube houses (nhà ống), which

can be found throughout urban areas in Vietnam, have a very narrow front, with often only one room per floor, but several floors. In fact, the horizontal style of houses was changed into a vertical one. The upper floor of most houses has multiple functions. This floor often consists of two parts. The inner space is foremost used as the space where the ancestors are worshipped on a small altar. By contrast, the outer space comprises a small rooftop terrace, on which the house's facilities such as the reservoir for fresh water and the air conditioning are located. With the striving for clean and safe food this outer space, is increasingly used to cultivate vegetables and herbs (Kurfürst, 2019). These spaces of cultivation signify the house owner's wealth. The building of large rooftop gardens has become a sign of social and economic distinction as the following three cases illustrate.

Anh and Hoa live together with their two children and a female house-keeper in a spacious 5-storey house with a roof top garden in Bắc Từ Liêm, an urban district in the western part of Hanoi. They own a private business in the health sector. The office is located on the first floor. On the 2nd floor, the family's socio-economic status is displayed through a big TV screen, a large aquarium, and the wall decorated with souvenirs from abroad such as a plate with the Eiffel Tower in Paris and a miniature Taj Mahal. The family's bedrooms are situated on the 3rd floor and the kitchen is installed on the 4th floor. The 5th and last floor is divided into an inner space with the ancestors' altar and an outer space consisting of the roof-top garden. The house maid, who refers to herself as "the main vegetable cultivator", names the different kinds of vegetables and herbs she grows here: garlic, onions, chilies, chive, and different kinds of cabbage, tomatoes, and leafy greens that are used to cook the soup that is served with almost any Vietnamese dish (canh). To cultivate the fresh produce, she creatively employs diverse materials such as ceramic pots, in which ornamental trees are usually grown, old polystyrene fruit boxes from the market as well as cut up water bottles hanging upside down. Asked about her motivation for gardening, she answers that she likes to grow vegetables for relaxation and to reduce stress. Of course, she uses the home-grown produce to cook the meals for the children, but she buys additional ingredients from the local Đồng Xa market.

Lan, is a 38-year old lecturer. She lives in a house in the Thành Trị District, a designated rural district of Hanoi. Lan uses many of the open spaces in her house to grow vegetables as well as medicinal herbs, utilizing diverse materials such as fruit boxes and ceramic pots to grow the greens. In the courtyard of her house, she even keeps chicken. She gardens not only because she is concerned about safe vegetables but also because she enjoys the beauty and fragrance of the plants. Being a working mother, she cannot keep up with the gardening on her own. That is why her aunt, who moved from her rural hometown to live with her in Hanoi, assists her.

Vân Anh lives together with her husband and two children in a generic housing area in Hanoi's Southern Thành Xuân District. The area is characterized by the typical small alleys that become narrower the deeper one gets into the housing area. In contrast to the usual tube houses, Vân Anh's houses has three spacious floors of approx. 50 sqm each. The kitchen is located on the first floor. The second and third floors house the family's bedrooms. The garden is located on the roof top. It occupies an area of approx. 50 sqm. Vân Anh explains that her family completely rebuilt the house two years ago. It

was then that they decided to build a roof-top garden. The planting beds are made of concrete. To fill them, they ordered three soil transporters. This weight requires a specific structural analysis of the house and thus a superior building material than usually applied when constructing houses in Vietnam. In their rooftop garden, Vân Anh and her husband grow tomatoes, garlic, potatoes, beans, kohlrabi etc. to such an extent that they are completely self-sufficient. “Last year we had 2 dozen kilos of tomatoes”, she says displaying a photo of her harvest on her mobile phone. She likes to garden for fun as well as to prepare her own food. Nonetheless, she still continues to buy additional supplies such as fruit from the neighborhood market. In sum, urban subsistence production is no longer limited to the urban poor as previous research on Southeast Asian cities (Forbes, 1996; Mc Gee, 1967) suggests but is increasingly being conducted by an emergent urban middle class that can afford the construction of a roof-top garden and the personnel to look after the greenery.

### Commoning: filling urban green with meaning

In many better-off housing areas, such as Bắc Từ Liêm and the Tây Hồ District, public spaces and wasteland are appropriated by individuals to cultivate their own food. Bắc Từ Liêm is an area that rapidly urbanized within the last ten years, now consisting of spacious one family houses with a dominantly middle-class population. Previously, the area consisted mainly of paddy fields. Today many families grow chilies, lemons, garlic and rau ngót Nhật (*Dicliptera chinensis*, a leafy green used to cook soup) in ceramic pots or recycled fruit boxes on the streets and sidewalks in front of their houses.

The Tây Hồ District, bordering the West Lake in the North West, used to be famous for its plantations of đào/quất, the traditional Vietnamese Lunar New Year tree. Yet, since the 1990s, great parts of the former agricultural land have been transformed into building land. Today it is a district popular among the better-off and expats living in Hanoi. The area is characterized by spacious one-family houses in walled compounds. In some streets, such as Đặng Thai Mai Street, a number of nurseries are still witness to the land's former usage. From Đặng Thai Mai Street, a small private street leads into a dead end that is surrounded by newly built one family houses. A designated flower bed of 15x3m is located right in the middle. In October 2014, the lot lay idle except for some palm tree seedlings. In between the seedlings, residents had planted egg plants and morning glory. A woman taking care of the vegetables declared the vegetables as clean and safe. According to her, only the people living in the immediate neighborhood had access to the land. One year later in October 2015, the urban green on the lot had become quite dense. Interviewees residing in the area explained that the lot is managed by the municipality, which plans to beautify the lot with greenery. While the land is lying idle, the residents of the neighborhood use the land to plant vegetables. This temporary usage of fallow land for gardening is a very common practice in Hanoi. Individuals occupy construction land in order to grow vegetables. Often a development plan already exists. Yet, as long as the constructions have not started, this kind of interim usage is

tolerated by the authorities (Kurfürst, 2019).<sup>4</sup> That is how urban dwellers make use and sense of the urban green surrounding them. By planting greenery, urbanites literally fill fallow land with meaning. Access to the land and the permission to harvest are subject to the social control within the neighborhood.

Here the people living in the area grow vegetables. This is state land, but it is not used. There is a plan to plant flowers on the lot, but it has not yet been realized. That is why the people cultivate the land. Everyone who likes to can use the lot (Qũnh, 58 years old, Tây Hồ District, translated from Vietnamese).

This is what Harvey (2012) refers to as the social practice of commoning. “This practice produces or establishes a social relation with a common whose uses are either exclusive to a social group or partially or fully open to all and sundry” (Harvey, 2012: 73). The relationship between the social group and this aspect of environment that is regarded as a common ought to be non-commodified, and thus outside the market logic. Such non-commodified usage of waste land for cultivation in Hanoi once again hints towards the bypassing of agricultural commodity chains and thus towards the de-commodification of vegetables.

## Conclusion

The idiom and hyperreality of ‘clean and safe vegetables’ signifies urbanites’ fear of consuming fresh produce that is contaminated with chemicals. Urbanites respond to these anticipated dangers of eating in diverse ways. Since the national food regulation is not trusted, they adopt trust-based strategies, such as maintaining the daily practice of buying from local vendors, and receiving boxes of fresh produce sent to the city by relatives and friends residing in the countryside. Additionally, urbanites grow vegetables and herbs for their own consumption in rooftop gardens in the private space of the home or on urban wasteland, which is collectively used to cultivate food. From the analysis of these strategies two main arguments were developed: First, by re-embedding their food supply into relationships of trust, the urbanites systematically shorten agricultural wholesale commodity chains in particular and global commodity chains in general. To put it in Kopytoff’s (1988) terms, this indicates the beginning of a process of de-commodification and singularization. Commodities are singularized by pulling them out of their usual commodity sphere (Kopytoff, 1988). For a long time, the monetary value of vegetables and herbs used to be equivalent to the availability and cost of their production. Since much of the fresh produce is easily grown in Vietnam, or the neighboring countries, it is quite cheap and thus affordable to many urban households. Yet, by cultivating vegetables at home or obtaining them directly from rural areas, urbanites have entered a process of selection, selecting between what they consider safe and unsafe foods. In this process of selection both instrumentally rational and value rational evaluative techniques are applied. Consequently, the process of selection is accompanied

4 Le Huu Viet and Tra Giang (2014) report of the development of so-called ‘mini’ gardens in the NUA of Trung Hòa Nhân Chính, Nam Trung Yên and Định Công.

by the process of significance as new meanings (Kockelman, 2012), such as the value of safety, are ascribed to the fresh produce.

According to Kopytoff (1988) the only moment the commodity status of a thing is not in question is the immediate moment of exchange. In their study of transactional orders Parry and Bloch (1989) differentiate between two spheres of exchange activities: a short-term cycle, comprising e.g. commodity exchange, and a long-term cycle, “concerned with reproduction of the social and cosmic order” characterized by reciprocity (Parry and Bloch, 1989: 2). While the purchasing of vegetables would correspond to exchange in the short-term cycle, the exchange via kin and friends as well as gardening would need to be considered in the long-term exchange cycle. The commodity of vegetables and herbs is no longer exchanged based solely on a monetary value but also based on a social value ascribed to it. Urban gardeners provide home-grown fresh produce as a gift to family and friends, while using it to prepare food for their families and friends.

Second, in the light of food safety, urban residents provide solutions to the problems they are confronted with in urban areas. To attain what they regard fresh and safe vegetables and herbs they creatively employ the spaces and materials the city offers them in their home or their immediate neighborhood. Accordingly, the creative employment of diverse materials and the urban built environment to grow food demonstrate urbanites’ social creativity in dealing with the challenges and contingencies of the city.

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